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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 01974

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SUBJECT: FURTHER DETERIORATION IN SOUTH LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 1961

¶1. (U) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION. HEAVY FIGHTING IN THE SIDON AREA CONTINUED ON MARCH 30-31 CAUSING NUMEROUS CASUALTIES. ACCORDING TO MOST REPORTS REACHING BEIRUT, THE FIGHTING, WHICH FOLLOWS RECENT LF-LAF CLASHES IN THE AREA (REFTEL), INCLUDED THE STRONG, DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF ARMED PALESTINIAN ELEMENTS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

¶2. (U) WIDELY PORTRAYED HERE AS PART OF AN ISRAELI PLAN TO REDISTRIBUTE THE POPULATION OF SOUTH LEBANON AND TO FORM A PREDOMINANTLY CHRISTIAN BORDER SECURITY STRIP, THE CLASHES IN SIDON HAVE PREOCCUPIED LEBANESE GOVERNMENTAL, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS OVER THE WEEKEND. PRIME MINISTER KARAMI CALLED INDIRECTLY ON THE U.S. TO USE ITS INFLUENCE TO HALT THE ALLEGED ISRAELI PLAN. SYRIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE CHIEF GENERAL KHOLI IS EXPECTED IN BEIRUT TODAY, APRIL 1, TO DISCUSS RECENT POLITICAL AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS WITH PRESIDENT GEMAYEL. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

¶2. (U) FIGHTING INTENSIFIED IN THE SIDON AREA ON MARCH 30-31 BETWEEN LF MILITIAMEN AND LAF UNITS. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, HOWEVER, THE LAF'S ROLE WAS ECLIPSED WHEN PALESTINIAN UNITS BASED IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS TOOK A STRONG, ACTIVE ROLE IN THE FIGHTING AGAINST THE LF.

¶3. U) ON MARCH 30, THE LF REPORTEDLY BEGAN HEAVY, ALMOST CONTINUOUS SHELLING OF THE REFUGEE CAMPS AT AYN AL-HILWAH AND MIYAH MIYAH AND OF OTHER RESIDENTIAL AREAS IN SIDON. PRO-ARAFAT PALESTINIAN FORCES, BACKED BY OTHER MUSLIM MILITIAS, RESPONDED AND HEAVY FIGHTING ENSUED. SIMULTANEOUSLY, CLASHES BETWEEN THE LF AND LAF WERE REPORTED ALONG A LINE INCLUDING KANAYA, KAHAYA, HLALIYAH, AND BRAMIYAH. THERE ARE ALSO REPORTS OF AMAL UNITS TAKING PART IN THE FIGHTING IN SIDON, BUT WE HAVE NO DETAILED INFORMATION. THE MARCH 30 CASUALTY TOLL AMOUNTED TO TWENTY-EIGHT KILLED AND FORTY WOUNDED, MOSTLY CIVILIANS.

¶4. (U) ON MARCH 31, THE FIGHTING CONTINUED, WITH THE MOST INTENSIVE ACTION CENTERED AROUND THE AYN AL-HILWAH REFUGEE CAMP. ACCORDING TO FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS CITED IN THE LOCAL PRESS, THE CAMP CAME UNDER HEAVY SHELLING FROM LF ARTILLERY POSITIONS NEAR JEZZIN. HEAVY FIGHTING WAS ALSO REPORTED BETWEEN LF UNITS AND LAF POSITIONS ON MAR ELIAS HILL. THE MARCH 31 CASUALTY TOLL AMOUNTED TO FIVE KILLED AND FIFTEEN WOUNDED. THERE ARE UNCONFIRMED REPORTS OF PALESTINIAN CIVILIANS FLEEING THE CAMPS FOR SIDON ITSELF AND OF SUNNI AND CHRISTIAN RESIDENTS OF SIDON MOVING NORTHWARD TO BEIRUT.

¶5. (U) ELSEWHERE IN THE SOUTH, ISRAELI UNITS REPORTEDLY CROSSED BACK INTO PREVIOUSLY EVACUATED TERRITORY FOR THE SIXTH TIME AS PART OF A DRAGNET OPERATION IN THE IQLIM AL-TIFFAH REGION SOUTH OF SIDON. LENGTHY LOCAL PRESS REPORTS INDICATE TWENTY-THREE PERSONS KILLED AND FORTY-FIVE PERSONS

WOUNDED, MOSTLY IN THE VILLAGE OF JBAA.

¶6. (LOU) IN THE ONLY OTHER SIGNIFICANT FIGHTING OVER THE WEEKEND, LAF UNITS EXCHANGED ARTILLERY FIRE WITH PSP MILITIAMEN ON MARCH 30 ALONG THE SUQ AL-GHARB/AYTAT RIDGELINE FRONT SOUTHEAST OF BEIRUT. TWO LAF SOLDIERS WERE REPORTEDLY KILLED. WHEN THE SHELLING SPILLED OVER ONTO THE EAST-BEIRUT RESIDENTIAL AREAS OF BAABDA, HAZIMIYAH, AND MKALLAS, SEVERAL SHELLS HIT JUST OUTSIDE THE PERIMETER OF THE AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE AT YARZE. EMBASSY PERSONNEL HAD ALREADY TAKEN REFUGE IN THE SHELTER.

¶7. (U) EFFORTS TO HALT THE DETERIORATION OF THE SITUATION IN SOUTH LEBANON PREOCCUPIED LEBANESE GOVERNMENTAL, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS THROUGHOUT THE WEEKEND. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, FOLLOWING A MEETING ON MARCH 30, PRESIDENT GEMAYEL, PRIME MINISTER KARAMI, AND SENIOR LAF OFFICERS DECIDED TO REINFORCE LEBANESE ARMY UNITS IN THE SOUTH, IN PART WITH EQUIPMENT NOW BEING DELIVERED FROM THE U.S. MINISTERS HOSS AND BARRI, WHO TRAVELED TO DAMASCUS MARCH 31 TO MEET WITH SARG VICE PRESIDENT KHADDAM AND DRUZE LEADER JUMBLATT, HAVE DEMANDED SUCH A REINFORCEMENT OF LAF UNITS IN THE SOUTH FOR SEVERAL WEEKS.

¶8. (U) FOLLOWING THE MARCH 30 MEETING, PRIME MINISTER KARAMI ACCUSED ISRAEL OF PROVOKING THE VIOLENCE IN SIDON "IN THE HOPE OF OBTAINING A NEW DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION (ON A CONFESSIONAL BASIS) AND EVENTUALLY ESTABLISHING A BUFFER ZONE (ALONG THE BORDER STRIP)." STATING THAT THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH MUST BE UNDERSTOOD IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT, KARAMI SAID THAT THE GOL WOULD UNDERTAKE CONTACTS WITH OTHER GOVERNMENTS WHICH HAVE INFLUENCE IN THE REGION.

¶9. (U) NOTING THAT "THE UNITED STATES IN PARTICULAR CAN ACT TO CLEAN UP THE SITUATION," KARAMI ADDED THAT THE GOL HAD NOT/NOT BEEN INFORMED OF A VISIT TO LEBANON BY ASSISTANT SECRETARY MURPHY DURING THE LATTER'S FORTHCOMING TRIP TO THE MIDDLE EAST.

¶10. (U) SHIITE AMAL LEADER NABIH BARRI DENOUNCED THE INTENSIFICATION OF FIGHTING IN SIDON IN ESSENTIALLY THE SAME WORDS AS KARAMI. "ISRAEL," HE SAID, "AIMS AT PROVOKING A NEW DEMOGRAPHIC REDISTRIBUTION AND TO RESHAPE ITS FRONTIER WITH LEBANON SO THAT THE CHRISTIANS IN SIDON AND JEZZIN ARE MOVED TO THE BORDER ZONE AND THAT THE MUSLIMS, MORE PRECISELY THE SHIITES, ARE FORCED BACK INTO THE INTERIOR OF LEBANON." "IT IS IN THIS CONTEXT," BARRI ADDED, "THAT ONE CAN UNDERSTAND THE RECENT EVENTS IN SIDON AND ORDERS WHICH WERE GIVEN TO THE 'INTIFADA' (I.E., JA'JA'S CHRISTIAN DECISION MOVEMENT)..."

¶11. (U) IN A MARCH 31 TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH SARG PRESIDENT ASSAD, PRESIDENT GEMAYEL AGREED TO RECEIVE A SYRIAN ENVOY TO DISCUSS THE SITUATION IN SIDON AS WELL AS RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. SYRIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE CHIEF GENERAL KHOLI IS EXPECTED TO MEET WITH GEMAYEL TODAY, APRIL 1.

¶12. (C) COMMENT. THE CONTRADICTORY AND TENDENTIOUS REPORTS REACHING BEIRUT ABOUT THE FIGHTING IN SIDON ARE DIFFICULT TO UNRAVEL AND EVALUATE. PALESTINIAN UNITS DO APPEAR TO BE TAKING AN ACTIVE PART IN THE CLASHES. IN SHORT, THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH APPEARS TO BE DETERIORATING, AS EVERYONE HAD FEARED, INTO A HEIGHTENED LEBANESE/ISRAELI CONFLICT AND BITTER INTERCOMMUNAL CLASHES WITH PALESTINIAN

INVOLVEMENT.

LYNE